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Ten million workers in Britain toil in “low-quality” jobs

Research by the Health Foundation reveals that more than one in three UK employees—36 percent or 10 million people—are in low-quality jobs that can adversely affect their health. The report “What the Quality of Work Means for our Health” confirms what most workers have long suspected—poor conditions at work make you ill.

The Health Foundation, an independent charity founded in 1983, states its commitment “to bringing about better health and health care for people in the UK.” It compiled this report by analysing the latest data from a survey of 40,000 people by Understanding Society in its government-funded UK household longitudinal study at the University of Essex. The data that establishes the link between low-quality work and self-reported poor health covers the period 2016/17.

It has long been accepted that unemployment and poverty impact on health and longevity. A recent study quantified this, showing that the wealthy enjoy “eight to nine more years of ‘disability free’ life after age 50 than the poorest American and English adults.”

Unemployment in the UK is at its lowest point since 1975. The June-to-August 2019 employment rate stands at 75.9 percent. The figure for underemployment shows little change—5 percent of the population or 2.4 million are in part-time employment and prefer longer hours. Of the unemployed, 41 percent have been without work for six months or more.

The report summarises the ways in which unemployment causes poor health.

It is a major stressor, which can lead to “unhealthy coping behaviours,” for example drinking and smoking. It causes poverty, which correlates to poorer health, as well as harming job prospects.

The report finds that higher employment rates have not, however, led to better health outcomes in the population. This is excluding physical injury at work, which is still a problem though the numbers have fallen in the past few decades.

The very nature of many working-class jobs militates against good health. The charity explains that a “proliferation of low-quality jobs carries health risks.”

Their conclusions are based on the link they observed between two or more self-reported socioeconomic risk factors that define low-quality work and self-rated poor health (less than good, very good or excellent).

Low-quality work is defined as low job security (the job may not last beyond a year), low job satisfaction, low job well-being (health, happiness and prosperity), low pay and low job autonomy, in order of prevalence from most to least.

Senior analyst at the Health Foundation, Adam Tinson, said: “Low-quality work is where someone feels stressed and unfulfilled, whether that’s due to pay, insecurity, a lack of autonomy or a feeling of dissatisfaction. This can harm people’s health.”

From the sample, 36 percent or over a third of all UK employees reported being in low-quality work defined by two or more of the above factors. Of this group, 15 percent said their health was poor, twice as many as those not in low-quality jobs.

Any single aspect of low-quality work was associated with more reports of a lack of good health than the group not in low-quality work. Only 27 percent of UK employees reported they were not in low-quality jobs.

The factor most likely to increase stress levels was low job security, including temporary contracts, working in the gig economy and on zero-hours contracts. Working in the modern environment, the security of a “job for life” is something only remembered by the older generation.

The next deleterious factor is low job satisfaction, followed by low job well-being, and then low pay. Low pay is a major cause of stress.

According to the Resolution Foundation almost seven out of 10 adults in poverty in Britain live in households with at least one person in work. This is a rise from 20 years ago when it was five in 10.

The final factor determined as indicating low-quality work is low job autonomy, where the worker feels he has no control over what he or she does.

Take a day in the life of an Amazon order picker. For a wage of £9.12 an hour, he is driven to maximise the profits of shareholders, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. Bezos took a hit recently following a hefty divorce settlement that whittled his wealth, according to Forbes. His super-riches dwindled down from £126 billion to £113 billion—still making him the richest person in the world.

An Amazon employee must work according to targets and the speed of the machines that deliver the goods to be picked. The worker is also competing against his/her fellow workers, as the most productive worker will be named on a billboard and totals revealed. Speed-up is inbuilt into the system. The worker has no control over the job. Toilet breaks are discouraged because time off the job makes meeting targets less likely.

For 10 hours at a stretch, under artificial light, working in a cage with little chance to talk above the noise of machines or loud music and doing repetitive work that can lead to strain injuries—an Amazon order picker's job easily qualifies as low-quality work.

From halfway through November to January, which are peak times, overtime is compulsory, meaning an 11-and-a-half-hour day, five days a week. The stress levels mount up.

The longer a worker experiences stress, the more the likelihood of damage to health. Allostatic load, or wear and tear on the body due to chronic stress, is associated with a whole array of illnesses both mental and physical, including anxiety and depression, high blood pressure and heart disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes and asthma. The build-up of stress also weakens the immune system, a possible precursor to infections and even cancer.

The longer one spends in a low-quality job, the greater the risk to health. The report notes that of those in low-quality employment in 2010/11, half or 51 percent were still in work perceived as low-quality in 2016/17.

These findings are confirmed by research on the opposite end of the socioeconomic scale—the Whitehall 11 Study of higher-grade civil servants. Greater autonomy at work and rewards for their efforts including remuneration and promotions reduced stress levels and promoted better health outcomes.

Those in low-quality jobs, the Health Foundation report points out, tend to be younger adults, workers in less skilled and more routine jobs, and members of black or minority ethnic groups.

An earlier study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* by Chandola and Zhang found that “unemployed adults who transitioned into poor quality work had greater adverse levels of biomarkers [such as high blood pressure] compared with their peers who remained unemployed.” A similar effect did not occur when moving to jobs perceived as being better.

That more than a third of workers in the UK are in low-quality jobs shows the extent to which the country has been transformed by successive governments into a cheap labour platform—where more than half its inhabitants live on £18,000 a year or less. This destruction of better paid, secure jobs underscores the transformation of the trade unions into organisations that serve the profit interests of the conglomerates.

The Health Foundation offers no solutions to inequality in health outcomes at work, except a few appeals to governments and profit hungry companies.

Clutching at straws, the charity sees a silver lining in Brexit, stating, “With the UK’s employment law set for review as it leaves the EU, action is needed to improve job quality. Beyond regulatory fixes, employers should give greater consideration to job security, job design, management practices and the working environment to boost job quality.”

The exact opposite is being prepared by the Johnson Conservative government. It has already given a foretaste of the massive attacks to come on the living conditions of the working class by announcing the setting up of free ports which will become hubs for super-exploitation of workers by global firms, 5 percent cuts in public spending across the board, and the turn to authoritarian methods of rule.

Rising trade war, of which Brexit is an expression, means companies, aided by the trade unions, will drive down wages and conditions further in order to remain competitive. The only answer to trade war and where it will lead—ever greater impoverishment for the working class—is the appropriation of society’s wealth that is in the hands of a few rich oligarchs.

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